



The Journal of Social Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vsoc20>

Psychological and Communicative Processes Contributing to Panic Behavior

Robert S. Albert ^a

^a Division of Communication , Boston University , USA

Published online: 01 Jul 2010.

To cite this article: Robert S. Albert (1956) Psychological and Communicative Processes Contributing to Panic Behavior, The Journal of Social Psychology, 44:1, 73-81, DOI: [10.1080/00224545.1956.9921903](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1956.9921903)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1956.9921903>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND COMMUNICATIVE PROCESSES CONTRIBUTING TO PANIC BEHAVIOR*

Division of Communication, Boston University

ROBERT S. ALBERT

A. INTRODUCTION

Human behavior characterized as "panic behavior" or observed within "critical social situations" (18) has been investigated in various ways in the past. The various approaches used in such investigations are basically these: (a) critical or disorganized behavior is descriptively noted, a running report of the participants' behavior developed and observations culled from the material (18, 22). One of the best examples of this method is a report by Katz (11) on the effects of bombing; a more inchoate example is that of Sinha (22). (b) The disrupted behavior is considered a special case of the frustration (or deprivation) and aggression hypothesis in which individual subjects are either observed in a frustrating or stressful situation (6, 20, 21), or in which there is experimental manipulation of subjects under such conditions within either organized, long-term groups, or unorganized, short-term groups (8). Other experimental conditions have been facilitative and/or competitive work conditions (16, pages 694-715; 5); or, varied degrees of experimentally induced cohesiveness (1, 7). (c) Recently Mintz (15) has conducted an ingenious laboratory experiment directed specifically to the study of panic. The studies of Smith (23) and Leavitt (12) using rigorous experimental designs, contribute knowledge of group processes under less than optimal communication conditions, and should be included in our discussion.

The Lippitt and White (14) analysis of children's behavior under three different leader-member relationships throws considerable light on the varied effect of differing group atmospheres upon membership behavior, and is important to the study of panic behavior through implication although subjects were children. It would be wise to have comparable information for adults, as well. The studies by Smith and Leavitt investigated communication patterns which closely approximated Lippitt and White's three group atmospheres of authoritarian, laissez-faire, and democratic leadership. The results of the three studies are similar in some important respects, and appear

*Received in the Editorial Office on October 15, 1954.

to be reliable whether the communication process conducted over various kinds of channels is vis-a-vis or impersonal.

However, when one attempts to explain panic behavior, certain conceptual questions become evident. This condition is not the fault of the experimenters. They have been primarily interested in problems only indirectly concerned with panic-behavior. The variables they have chosen to investigate are perhaps not always the variables most important in the analysis of some other segments of behavior.¹

Another factor contributing to the lack of understanding of this problem has been the negligible amount of concomitant investigation of personality variables within such experiments. This leaves an entire area of behavioral determinants unexplored. It would be an invaluable finding indeed if the assumed nullification of personality variables and individual differences within group experiments or conditions were tested, if the personality variables that *were* being purposely held in abeyance in experiments were made more explicit, or if there was a clearer conceptualization of which personality variables did function within group processes. Results in experiments by Bieri (4), Scodel and Mussen (19), and Haythorn (10), to mention only a few more recently reported, cast doubt upon the "neutrality" of personality variables within this problem area.

What we wish to do in the following section is to explicate certain stimulus conditions and variables within which panic behavior is observed and with which it is related. We hope that once this analysis has been achieved, investigation into the personalities of persons displaying this behavior will gain additional experimental meaning and clarity.

B. DISCUSSION

Generally speaking, persons displaying panic behavior are said to display non-adaptive behavior (15). This statement needs clarification and more specification if it is to be both theoretically meaningful and more amenable to experimentation. As it now stands, the statement is little more than a non-participant's characterization of the behavior of those persons. While their behavior *may* appear to the observer as non-adaptive, such a statement says very little beyond the descriptive level and nothing about the perceptions, the assumptions, the plans, or the actually *attempted* behavior of the participants. Neither does this description speak of the stimulus conditions present and in reference to which these people are responding.

¹For a more complete and comprehensive discussion of such methodological issues and analysis of experimentation upon small groups the writer suggests Argyle's fine article (3).

Panic behavior may not be non-adaptive, but behavior highly adaptive in aim, although not always successful in achieving its aim. Needless to say, not all the many goal-directed situations in which people act are to be characterized as panic situations regardless of how emotionally fraught, dangerous, physically or psychologically harmful they might appear to be, or actually be for the participants of those stimulus situations.

It appears to the present writer that those situations in which panic behavior is displayed may be characterized by at least eight concomitant conditions. These are the following: (a) An immediate, personal threat to the individual. (b) A short duration. The perception of duration will depend, in part, on the degree of complexity of the occasion and the urgency of the threat (see *f* below) as well as the actual duration. But within the threatening situation the time available for decision making is known to be too short for the individual to consider fully many alternative patterns of behavior. He may be aware of obvious alternatives before him, but he is unable to compare and differentiate them to a satisfactory degree. This perception of alternatives merely hinders the decision making process; it does not modify the threat to be met. (c) The threat, if not satisfactorily reduced or checked, will be perceived by the individual as having irrevocable, long-term consequences for him and close associates with whom he is ego-involved. (Death would be an extreme point of a continuum going from the death of the individual to severe material damage.) Regardless of which extreme is thought to occur, the individual will see the threat in highly personal terms, and his behavior will be highly egocentric.

It would appear from the above three characteristics that the panic-situation was one that developed within a time span too short to permit any prearranged plans with which to meet it. Such a situation is of major proportions existentially. It affects very important aspects of the participant's life. If the threat is not only met, but checked before the more central portions of the individual's life-space (13) are injured or unbalanced, resolution of the resulting situation will demand a drastic alteration of long-term plans, goals, and previously learned behavioral technics relied upon to attain those goals, and maintain acceptable perceptions of one's self and status within the community. An example of such a far reaching phenomenon would be a fire in a small town that destroyed a large proportion of its business area,—threatening lives; putting many out of jobs, business; wiping out capital assets, etc. Nevertheless the three above characteristics are not enough to explain why it would be that only some persons might display panic-behavior.

Our fourth variable is derived from the above discussion. (*d*) The stimulus situation initiates behavior that essentially attempts to maintain the status quo against loss or extreme alteration rather than any personal or material aggrandization or incremental change. It would follow from this that (*e*) participants perceive a specific problem confronting them with the situation that needs to be solved immediately. The goal of this problem solving is clear; but the steps or best method to use (or even possible) are not clearly structured overtly or cognitively. The situation therefore lacks cognitive clarity (2) for the participants. Such a covert condition results in a lack of a clear mode of action and an inability to verbalize one's plan of action either extensively (to cover the majority of the actions needed or actually being taken) or consistently with some sort of ordered behavioral sequence present (rationally). This inability to verbalize (and rationalize) one's plans plus the fact that these plans are highly ego-centrally oriented, stand proportionately in the way of any intelligible communication of these plans. For in order for communication to be intelligible and effective it must be as overt as possible, conventional in the referent-meaning of its units (words, gestures, pictures, etc.) and unarbitrary and unambiguous in the sequential ordering of these units so that points of modifying emphasis convey to the communicatee the corresponding evaluations that the communicator intends (cf. 17, p. 228).

The degree of cognitive clarity any one participant within such conditions possesses is a direct function of at least three of the above variables. These are his initial understanding of the *problematic* situation at its beginning, the number of solutions present from which the individual may choose in making a decision of action, and lastly, the amount of time possible in which to select from among the alternative procedures, that one plan of behavior upon which the individual bases his subsequent behavior. This chosen alternative solution we call the participant's decision. Since the time range is short, once the participant decides upon one alternative, he is usually committed to it from that point on to the final resolution. This commitment is a factor in the exigence felt by the individual. It also adds to the desperation of subsequent behavior since this behavior represents to the participant his one possibility for security and solution.

Naturally as either the number of alternatives decreases and/or the amount of time allowed for decision-making increases, an individual's cognitive clarity should increase. Maximum clarity would be possible within a set of conditions where there is but one possible line of action open, and this one possibility is recognized. A condition of minimum clarity occurs where

there is an increasing number of alternative procedures beyond a contrasting dichotomy open to the participant, and the amount of time possible for decision-making decreases. The dimension of time-perspective and the exigency of the situation confronting the individual may both be functions of the personality involved. But as stated above we are at the present time not sure what the nature of the relationship is.

The writer does not feel that an explicit statement can be made at this time concerning various group conditions and the facilitation or hindrance in problem solving among *groups* of persons within the same conditions. To do so now would be indiscriminant and based on too little information concerning the conditions underlying the emergence of leadership, the importance of varying amount of identification among participants or the importance of the initial degree of rapport already established. Nor can we say very much about the presence and functioning of active sub-groups, and the psychological or physical isolation of an individual among the groups. These are major variables within group processes. While we recognize them, we do not feel adequate in stating their function within ongoing, threatened groups of persons.

These variables' function can only be speculated upon; their actual importance may be contradictory to what we might expect. For example, if the isolation between sub-groups within a panic situation were great and there were recognized leaders for these groups, the behavior witnessed may not only be an attempt to solve the emerging problem, but quite possibly an endeavor also to keep the other group(s) from solving the problem first and thereby obstructing the paths and means to solution, e.g., runs on banks and market crashes. Or the opposite may occur. Two psychologically isolated and hostile groups may cooperate in the face of impending catastrophe, disregard the exhortations of their nominal leaders, and establish a basis of shared experience upon which are based more friendly attitudes, e.g., N.A.T.O. Or it may be the case that . . . and so it could go.

The next important variable would be then the (f) alternate paths and modes to the solution perceived by participants which we mentioned above. This should be qualified. Within the situation sub-goals *may* be perceived by the participants. If these are attained they may lessen the finality and comprehensiveness of the final damage but none are certain to. This lack of certainty increases the anxiety engendered by deciding which will be the one attempted. This uncertainty also stresses the great need for time in which to think about and compare the alternatives.

If the present writer understands him correctly Mintz believes that

the variables of situation-ambiguity and the following one concerning communication are the main determinants in panic behavior. Without the consideration of other variables these two phases of the situation are not enough to differentiate between problem-solving under speed conditions and a situation in which we find panic-behavior occurring while the various participants are attempting to solve an important problem.

The next variable is concerned with communication. This communication variable permits participants to attempt various methods of meeting the demands of the situation with the aid of other persons. As this cooperative behavior appears feasible to the persons involved, so may increase their expectations and own confidence that they can meet the situation with a better solution than they alone could bring about. This variation in estimates deals specifically with communication among the participants of instructions, suggested solutions, or merely descriptions of the situation which supplement one's present understanding of the unfolding situation, and therefore, augments his own knowledge of conditions. Thus, related to communication is (*g*) the possibility of an individual or an organized group to manipulate and, to some degree, control the behavior of other persons nearby by means of communication.

An individual's behavior is determined in part by his cognitive clarity concerning the important relationships and variables involved. This clarity and comprehension is a dual function of the intelligibility of the situation for him and/or the intelligibility of other persons' communicated recounts and interpretations of the events to him. It would follow that any inadequacy within, or disruption of, the communication channels, or a critical ratio² of noise would result in a breakdown of communication between persons. Such a breakdown would confound the message's comprehensibility, and render inoperative those plans and solutions being coordinated through the communicative processes.

Implied within the above discussion is the eighth variable. (*h*) The vari-

²Intelligibility of communication may be looked upon as a function of either the ratio of noise to speech-sounds, or of the length and explicitness of the messages being communicated. Maximum intelligibility should prevail where the noise-to-speech-ratio is zero, and the length and explicitness of messages (the number of words allowed sent) is unlimited. Minimum intelligibility should prevail in cases where the noise-to-speech ratio is either .5 or thereabouts. Intelligibility of the communications should also decrease as the number of listeners relevant to the sender increases and the length of messages and the time allowed within which to communicate both decrease. Theoretically a condition of absolute unintelligibility could be reached, but it is believed that the futility of trying to communicate within such a condition would be so obvious that participants would not attempt any communication except for reasons of catharsis and/or desperation; e.g., anything from blaring radios to highly excited crowds at large sporting events.

able of interdependence (13) is perhaps the most important single condition present in any social behavior. The behavior of most of the participants within a panic inducing situation is highly interdependent. This relationship of interdependence is recognized and acted upon by the participants.

What has appeared to some observers as "emotional contagion" (9) might be conceptualized as behaviors (and the accompanying heightened psychophysiological correlates) of persons within the same situation, who perceive and react to it similarly. The stimulus situation has for participants the same distribution of forces. And the same possible consequences are perceived and interpreted as important and threatening by the majority of participants within the same existent conditions.

The structural properties of a group (and/or a psychologically meaningful environment) is better characterized by the relationships between the parts rather than by the parts themselves (cf. 13, Chapter 9). The panic-situation itself is structured by the relations between the participants and the above situational characteristics. It would follow that as either the relationships between the participants become more bound and interrelated by means of communication, or the relations between the various situational features become more clear in terms of the restrictions and dangers involved, the behavior of persons within that situation will become more interdependent and, proportionately, more similar, e.g., jams at doors in fires.

C. SUMMARY

By way of summary let us draw together the various variables that we have discussed above in a form that would allow future derivation of experimental hypotheses. Panic-behavior is a function of a highly stressful situation characterized by the presence of a sudden threat to the individual (or group) which occurs within a short span of time. This threat if unchecked or not solved immediately will have irrevocable, long-term consequences upon the ensuing behavior of the participants. Therefore, the behavior that occurs soonest after the perception of threat is of the nature of problem-solving and the maintenance of the status quo against loss of either a physical or social-psychological nature. This problem-solving behavior is complicated by the perception of alternative solutions, their ambiguous consequences, and is hindered by unintelligibility within the communication process. This last condition becomes increasingly important as the interdependency of all the participants increases, or participants become more isolated from the main body of persons involved within the threatening situation.

Implicit in the discussion are certain implied characteristics of the behavior per se. Panic-behavior itself will be characterized by a high state of anxiety and erratic and sometimes random behavior. That is, behavior that is not based upon a *consistent* and *coördinated* plan of action. Panic behavior is further characterized by the taking of risks (especially towards the later portions of the situation); and a high rate of irrelevant communication directed towards persons other than those nearby in spatial proximity and immediately involved, regardless of these persons' particular bearing on the individual's position; e.g., elliptical statements, swearing, cries, holophrastic sentences, and other verbalizations that do not convey any clear-cut referent-meaning to the auditors (as distinguished from the expression of emotions).

REFERENCES

1. ALBERT, R. S. Comments on the scientific function of the concept of cohesiveness. *Amer. J. Sociol.*, 1953, **59**, 231-234.
2. ———. Inadequate cognitive function as a basis for acute anxiety. (Unpublished paper.)
3. ARGYLE, M. Methods of studying small social groups. *Brit. J. Psychol.*, 1952, **43**, 269-279.
4. BIERI, J. Changes in interpersonal perceptions following social interaction. *J. Abn. & Soc. Psychol.*, 1953, **48**, 61-66.
5. DEUTSCH, M. An experimental study of the effects of co-operation and competition upon group process. *Human Rel.*, 1949, **2**, 199-231.
6. DOLLARD, J., *et al.* Frustration and Aggression. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1939.
7. FESTINGER, L., *et al.* Theory and Experimentation in Social Communication. University of Michigan: Report of Studies Under Office of Naval Research Contract, 1950.
8. FRENCH, J. R. P. Organized and unorganized groups under fear and frustration. *Univ. Iowa Stud. Child Wel.*, 1944, **20**, 229-308.
9. GROSSER, D., POLANSKY, N., & LIPPITT, R. A laboratory study of behavioral contagion. *Human Rel.*, 1951, **4**, 115-142.
10. HAYTHORN, W. The influence of individual members on the characteristics of small groups. *J. Abn. & Soc. Psychol.*, 1953, **48**, 276-284.
11. KATZ, D. In J. G. Miller (Ed.), *Experiments in Social Process*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950. (Pp. 65-77.)
12. LEAVITT, H. J. Some effects of certain communication patterns on group performance. *J. Abn. & Soc. Psychol.*, 1951, **46**, 38-50.
13. LEWIN, K. Field Theory in Social Science. New York: Harper, 1951.
14. LIPPITT, R., & WHITE, R. The "social climate" of children's groups. In R. Barker, J. Kounin, and H. White (Eds.), *Child Behavior and Development*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1943.
15. MINTZ, A. Non-adaptive group behavior. *J. Abn. & Soc. Psychol.*, 1951, **46**, 150-159.
16. MURPHY, G., MURPHY, L. B., & NEWCOMB, T. M. Experimental Social Psychology. New York: Harper, 1937.
17. NAGEL, E. Logic without ontology. In Y. H. Krikorian (Ed.), *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1944.

18. NEWCOMB, T. M., & HARTLEY, E. L. (*Eds.*). *Readings in Social Psychology*. New York: Holt, 1947.
19. SCODEL, A., & MUSSEN, P. Social perceptions of authoritarians and non-authoritarians. *J. Abn. & Soc. Psychol.*, 1953, **48**, 181-184.
20. SEARS, R. R., *et al.* Minor studies of aggression: I. Measurement of aggressive behavior. *J. of Psychol.*, 1940, **9**, 277-281.
21. SHERIF, M. *An Outline of Social Psychology*. New York: Harper, 1948.
22. SINHA, D. Behavior in a catastrophic situation: A psychological study of reports and rumors. *Brit. J. Psychol.*, 1952, **43**, 200-209.
23. SMITH, S. Unpublished studies in communication networks. In D. Cartwright and A. Zander (*Eds.*), *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory*. Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, 1953. (Pp. 499-500.)

School of Public Relations and Communications
84 Exeter Street
Boston 16, Massachusetts